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ABSTRACT

Rhetoric must be defined not merely as a way of transmitting knowledge, but as a way of knowing. Knowing is a social act, requiring the mind to categorize sensory data intersubjectively, according to category systems that are socially generated and consensually validated. The dissociation between knower and known implied by the stance of objectivity ignores this relationship between knower and known. But denial of "absolute truth" does not lead to solipsism. Intersubjectivity assumes that the relationships between events are posited by those who are in interaction with the phenomena observed and that these relationships are verified through discourse. This perspective points up the unity of rhetoric and knowledge. That which is "truly believed" is a socially held belief resting upon evidential references to the empirical world which find wide agreement. Attitudes toward belief define what is and is not considered knowledge. Finally, if rhetoric is a construction of reality into socially meaningful patterns--a way of knowing--consensus becomes the outcome of argument that creates meaningful and useful patterns. (JL)

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ARGUMENT AND TRUTH:

SOME EPISTEMOLOGICAL QUESTIONS

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The perspective of rhetoric as epistemic has become, in its most general aspect, a commonplace of the field of communication. As Michael Leff stated in his evaluation of modern rhetorical theory, the field has been moving toward a perspective that "rejects the modern dichotomy between communication and knowledge as it embraces the humanist conception of rhetoric as a way of knowing."[1] Communication is no longer regarded as the mere transmission of knowledge but constitutes, to some extent, a vital part of the very concept of knowledge. The specific implications of this commonplace are in a great deal more doubt and have been the subject of intense debate among modern rhetoricians.[2] Many of the same questions have remained before the professional forum in this debate: in what sense is knowledge rhetorical; how much of what is known is the result of an intersubjective process, and; when can we say we know "truth"?

The central problem in answering such questions has been to achieve a unity of knowledge and rhetoric which does not slip into solipsism on the one hand or revert back to an implied dichotomy between the terms on the other hand. Richard Crable has recently pointed out that much of the problem in the study of rhetoric as epistemic has come from the tendency, both conscious and unconscious, to focus on knowledge as a product rather than the process of knowing.[3] While in essential agreement with Crable's assessment of the state of rhetorical epistemology, it will be argued here that the central problem lies deeper; within the distinction between knowledge and knowing itself. It will be argued that the epistemological status of rhetoric must be defined quite literally as a <u>way</u> of knowing, that any useful concept of knowledge will include the human means of knowing. Rather than distinguishing between them, it is best to consider knowing and knowledge synonymous for all practical purposes.

KNOWING AS AN ACT

The emphasis upon knowledge as a product to which Crable alluded is understandable. Knowing is productive toward the end of participating in the world.[4] The residue of past experiences and controversies that are gathered in libraries tends to create a bias toward a product orientation where knowledge exists in stasis. There can be no doubt that these artifacts are used as given starting points for further explorations and inquiries. These observations, however, should not blind us to the relationship of this knowledge to its manner of being known.

Knowing is an act and, further, a social act. A central assumption lies at the root of this statement. Because of the inherent limitations of human perception, the ontological nature of the universe we inhabit can never be said to be known in any final sense.[5] The facticity of the world is always in doubt to some degree. A simple factual statement such as "My desk top is brown" depends upon two major presuppositions: a) there is some way for me to identify the object as a functional entity labeled a desk top, and; b) there is some way for me to categorize and name its color. The phenomenon of brownness can be verified by the senses of others, but brownness is not experienced directly. Our relationship with the "object of knowledge" is perceptually and linguistically mediated. The phenomenon of brownness is a verbal category used to characterize it to others. Because of the mediation of perception, which is an unconscious imaging process containing built-in presuppositions, the experience of objects is, in some sense, subjective.[6] A child learns to identify the color brown through interaction with others. Being mediated through such category systems, our sensory experience is constructed by being communicatively shared. In this sense, our experience of objects is intersubjective. Knowing is an act in that it requires mind to perform the operation of categorization

upon sensory data. It is a social act in that the category systems are socially generated and consensually validated even at the most fundamental levels of everyday, taken-for-granted experience.

The notion that these limitations of perception operate at more complex levels of action has been a well developed hypothesis. Michael Polanyi pointed out that perceptions of objects involve a tacit theoretical context which "involves implications about the nature of things which could be false."[7] When observations are gathered and bound together in explanations and arguments, these explanations and arguments become contexts through which further perceptions are organized. Scientific theories are intended to account for what is observed, but they are not reality itself.[8] Theories are "trained expectations" which the world of phenomena is under no obligation to respect.[9] In the world of science, too, knowing is a social act since theories are socially validated.

As Walter Carlton pointed out, a consensus based epistemology should "reassert the unanimity of human knowledge with respect to general method and to distinguish, not among differing 'actualizations' (as Farrell does), but among basic subject matters."[10] Carlton's emphasis upon method implies that all knowledge, scientific or social, is inextricably bound to the process by which it becomes known.

"KNOWER" AND "KNOWN"

When the means of knowing are ruled out of a definition of knowledge, a reification of the concept of knowledge is likely to occur. From this point of view knowledge is a "thing" existing apart from those who know "it." The operations performed upon the world to unearth knowledge become regarded as mere tools of excavating what is already there to be found. This dissociation

of means and ends contains the assumption that truth can ultimately be known just as a physical object can be seen. The implication of this is a reassertion of the dichotomy between knowledge and communication. As Cherwitz and Hikins have stated it: "Any problems inherent in the question 'How does one attain knowledge?' do not deny a definition of knowledge."[11] This position was more completely enunciated by Croasmun and Cherwitz:

> [O]bjectivity, because of its rejection of the doctrine of consensus as an epistemological criterion, avoids the possible equation of opinion and knowledge. Knowledge, as we said earlier, is not the product of consensus. Instead, consensus can be a goal of inquiry. Consensus, however, does not guarantee the critical appraisal of rival knowledge claims. By the same token, the position that reality is apart from our beliefs, attitudes, and values does not define knowledge solely in accordance with the process by which we come to know. In short, objectivity avoids obscuring definitional and methodological issues, and maximizes the rationality of the process by which we come to know.[12]

Croasmun and Cherwitz do accede that ultimate truth might not ever be objectively obtained. At the same time, they hold out the possibility of its attainment since reality is objectively present, prior to the experience of it, to be known.[13] While acknowledging Popper's caution that objective reality can never be apprehended in itself, Croasmun and Cherwitz reach a conclusion similar to that succinctly stated by C. Jack Orr: "Each construction of reality, tradition, framework or guess may be appreciated as a possible truth; but each must be criticized in the name of absolute truth."[14]

Even if the "absolute truth" of this position is held as an ideal goal, there exists a paradox at the heart of it. If objective reality cannot be

directly experienced, the critical criterion of truth can only be another socially generated construction. As in my earlier example, the reality of brownness is dependent upon the verification of others in accordance with the socially constructed manner in which the phenomenon is described and categorized. Because of the limitations of human perception and the socially based act of knowing, the search for truth beyond consensual validation meets only a different level of consensus. Any knowledge we may "possess" is contingent upon the means of perception and the means of reaching consensus about perception. If objective reality can be said to perform a regulatory function in human inquiry, it can only be said to perform this function as a convenience within the bounds of what it is possible to know. Certainly, data are taken as given or accepted to the extent that no argument seems necessary. This should not, however, be taken to mean that even what we hold as fact cannot be called into question.

Methods of knowing are more than a means to an end. The dissociation between knower and known implied by the stance of objectivity ignores the relationship of meaning between knower and known. The processes of gathering data and verifying that data in discursive exchange, evaluating propositions according to some recognized standards, and reflection upon the consequences of knowing cannot be arbitrarily set apart from a definition of knowledge. Interpreting European phenomenologists, Robert Scott captured the distinction between objectivist and intersubjective points of view:

> By "Knowing" we may stress a sense of from-the-outside-in, taking knowledge as an external anchor point that may bring one into consistent relationship with the world that is more than oneself. By "understanding" we may stress the sense of from-the-inside-out, taking understanding as a human and personal capacity to embrace what is outside the self, creating

rather than finding meaning in the world.[15]

Scott preferred to discard the term "knowing" because of the tendency to convert it to the static form of "knowledge." This need not be done if knowing is viewed as a process of creating meaning.

The sense in which the creation of meaning or "creation of reality" has been used may be in need of some clarification. Taken to extremes, such a symbol-centered philosophy can be taken as solipsistic. This has rarely been the case, however. Though often misunderstood, Brummett stated:

> I am not arguing that I can dream up any reality I like. I am not arguing that reality is subjective. The constraints of sensory data are one bond between human beings and one reason why I cannot imagine a tree and have it appear. But sense data by themselves are not experience. Experience is sensation plus meaning. Sensation alone is meaningless.[16]

This is hardly solipsism. In its strictest sense, this "creation of reality" is a contextualization of sensory experience. It is a recognition of the socially constructed tacit context which organizes what our senses perceive. These contexts are the symbolic logical typings and categories through which we can describe the world to others. The process of meaning-giving is the active participation in knowing at every moment of perception. Though not directly stated as such, Brummett was arguing for a process view of knowing which would be inseparable from the methodological dimension of knowledge.

The advantage of the intersubjective viewpoint is that it does not ignore the natural presuppositions that occur in encountering reality. Rather than assuming that pre-existing natural relationships are found by dissociated observers, intersubjectivity assumes that the relationships between events are

posited by those who are in interaction with the phenomena observed. These relationships are verified through discourse with others and our means of conducting such discourse. Outside of the process of interacting with others to check how far our perceptions and presuppositions mesh, we have no way of conferring meaning upon the undifferentiated stream of events. It is in this sense that rhetoric can be said to create reality, at least, the only reality which, given the limitations of human perceptual experience, can form the basis of further action. This socially created relationship of "knowers" and "known" is another central assumption in establishing the unity of rhetoric and knowledge.

TRULY BELIEVED JUSTIFICATION

The definition of knowledge as "justified true belief" reasserts the dichotomy between knowledge and rhetoric because of the implication of a correspondence to objective reality.[17] Once again, this separates knowledge from the human means of knowing and relegates rhetoric to the role of transmitting truth. It will be argued in this section of the essay that the phrase "truly believed justification" may more adequately preserve the symbolic relationship of knowers and known and, thus, the unity between rhetoric and knowledge.

The distinction between these perspectives seems but a small matter of focus, but it is a matter of focus with far-ranging implications. Rather than comparing objective "truth" with beliefs that may be false in establishing knowledge, truly believed justification stresses the primacy of the process of argumentation in knowing, that is, in the acceptance of what is regarded as true.

The central problem with comparing truth and belief lies in the fact that

one may not ever know truth. If, as argued earlier, even simple facts require a consensus of categorization, then a "false" fact can't be proven so until a new means of perceiving this has been found. Even so, we have no assurance that this new fact is "truer" than the old except through discursive conviction that the means of establishing the new gives us better reason to believe it. Further, until such a convincing case can be presented, we must act as if what we know is true. For all intents and purposes, the statement "The world is flat" was an item of knowledge for the ancient world because of the manner in which that view was shaped and shared with others. It was all they could know. The modern world does not necessarily "know better," it "knows differently." This position is implied in Cherwitz and Hikins' explication of justified true belief when they state:

> After all, there would be no basis for arguing or discussing any important issue, let alone acting on its implications, if persons were not convinced of the existence of some state of affairs to which their beliefs about the world, whether social or empirical, faithfully correspond. (emphasis added)[18]

It is the very notion of conviction that renders the concept of objective truth problematic. There is no truth that can be established without referring to a process of interaction which establishes what is to be taken as true and why it is to be so regarded. This is as true for the scientific world as it is for the social, even though it may be easier to establish consensus about physical phenomena which slip more easily into conceptual bins. Science itself, as Bateson stated it, "like all other methods of perception, is limited in its ability to collect the outward and visible signs of what may be truth."[19] Science cannot prove, it can only probe to the limits of perception and presupposition.

The truth criterion of "justified true belief" has the laudable intention of providing an ideal goal toward which knowing is directed with the attendant drawback of failing to see that the process of knowing at any given time is subject to social consensus. Whatever may be true for all time cannot ever be known at one time to provide a standard of measurement for human knowledge.

Rather than demanding that what counts as knowledge be true, the perspective of "truly believed justification" would agree with Paul Ricoeur that the process of knowing involves an act of faith; "I hope that I am within the bounds of truth."[20] Such a perspective recognizes that knowledge is a matter of the means of knowing which includes the human symbolic means of perception and discourse. That which is "truly believed" is a socially held belief resting upon evidential references to the empirical world which find wide agreement. These references which form the basis of evidence for argument must be capable of being shared with others. The question of whether or not a "true" universe exists apart from a personal observer becomes a moot issue. Meaning is built from agreed-upon perceptions of the world in order to frame the parameters of human action. What is observed can enter intentional use without positing objective reality as a necessity. The impingement of "reality" is not denied by this perspective, it is simply transformed into a relationship that takes into account the human talent for creating pattern from the random stream of events in the world.

A faith in the correspondence of widely-held belief and "truth" becomes even more critical in the formation of moral and social judgements. To deepen this analysis let us turn for a moment to Cherwitz and Hikins' notion of rhetoric as perspective.[21] Recognizing that perspectives occur because people live within a context that shapes their point of view, Cherwitz and Hikins attempt to account for disagreements in the world of human discourse.

They begin by asking how the statements "Richard Nixon was a good president" and "Richard Nixon was a bad president" can be taken to be items of knowledge at the same time and in the same way. They conclude that these statements can't be knowledge in the same way. Disagreement over such matters is really disagreement over different aspects of the phenomenon. Those disagreeing are arguing on "two different levels." They further conclude that such disagreements can be settled and true knowledge obtained "only to the degree that he/she has embraced the perspectives of others as well as one's own."

There is an important assumption here that the objective resolution of disagreement occurs through an additive process. Because of this misunderstanding of process, they are correct in saying that the two statements about Richard Nixon can't be knowledge in the same way, but less than satisfactory in accounting for why such conflicts occur. There is a very likely possibility that the grounds of differing evaluations of Richard Nixon will be incompatible and, in any objective sense, irresolvable. Let us assume that, in an argument over the appropriatness of Nixon's wire-tapping of government officials to stop security leaks, our interlocutors have agreed on the outward evidence-who called whom, what was ordered, the legal status of such orders, etc. One may argue that Nixon's actions were "good" because he took steps to safeguard national security, while the other argues that his actions were "bad" because he violated the rights of government officials. Our interlocutors are, indeed, arguing on different levels. They are, however, carving the visible world of events into very different portions of underlying value premises. As Walter Fisher has pointed out, there is no objective way to assign one value priority over another.[22] If this is so, how can either of these evaluations be deemed "true" or "false" in an objective sense? How could the perspectives be added to yield knowledge that transcends rhetoric? They cannot. The propositions

are preferable from one point of view or another.

From the point of view of "justified true belief," such a case is a paradox. If neither proposition can be true, neither can ever be knowledge. From the point of view of "truly believed justification," the contrary propositions can never be knowledge (as a product) either, but they can be part of a process of knowing the world. They are both value-based methods of processing and evaluating events that would otherwise have no meaning.

ARGUMENT AS KNOWING

To the extent that rhetoric is a construction of observation into socially meaningful patterns, it is a method or way of knowing. When symbolic constructions are argued, the process of knowing occurs in the inducement of others to share in the construction and either confirm or deny it.[23] Constructions of reality in any endeavor of knowing, contingent or empirical, present patterns of events for the validation of audiences or, as Crable put it, "relevant epistemic courts."[24] These audiences can be casual, elite, expert, or universal. The type of court needed for the evaluation of a construction depends upon what is to be set forth to be validated. Nonetheless, the process of knowing can only move forward through such tests by discourse and consensus.

The crucial issue for any consensus theory is the charge that it is standardless, that opinion and knowledge become confused.[25] This charge loses much of its force when knowledge is united with the process of how we come to know. If knowledge is a product (a status of correspondence with objective reality) held apart from the process of knowing, then it is a simple matter to reduce consensus to its most trivial aspect-knowledge as the popular position. To deny that knowledge is ever a product, that it is never more than knowing through the process of justification puts consensus in a rather different light.

Consensus, then, is the outcome of argument which creates meaningful and useful patterns from what has been observed. When facts that are advanced as evidence find wide agreement, when values that are upheld strike a wide resonance in the audiences to which they are addressed, the probability is greater that what is claimed will be regarded as true. When justifications are truly believed, we can say that we are engaged in the process of knowing. The standards of knowledge are the standards of discourse and seek an evaluation of claims upon the widest possible concensus about the phenomenal world, not upon an objective reality which cannot be directly experienced without the mediation of language and perception.

The unity of rhetoric and knowledge can be preserved only if other artificial dichotomies are eliminated; the dichotomies between "knower" and "known," "knowledge," and "knowing." By often failing to see the need to establish these unities, those holding symbol-centered approaches to rhetoric have held themselves open to attacks which do not hit the heart of this perspective if the implications were fully drawn out. If "the point of disagreement is whether the subject being discussed or the claim being made is real,"[26] the unification of knowledge and the process of knowing renders no judgement about the ontological nature of reality beyond the patterns which humans inter-subjectively build, argue, and accept.

FOOTNOTES

1. Michael Leff, "In Search of Ariadne's Thread: A Review of the Recent Literature on Rhetorical Theory," Central States Speech Journal, 29 (1978), 89.

2. Robert Scott, "On Viewing Rhetoric as Epistemic" Central States Speech Journal, 18 (1967), 1-17. Lloyd Bitzer, "The Rhetorical Situation," Philosophy and Rhetoric, 1 (1968), 1-15. Richard Vatz, "The Myth of the Rhetorical Situation," Philosophy and Rhetoric, 6 (1973), 154-161. Robert Scott, "On Viewing Rhetoric as Epistemic: Ten Years Later," Central States Speech Journal, 27 (1976), 258-266. Barry Brummett, "Some Implications of 'Process' or 'Intersubjectivity': Postmodern Rhetoric," Philosophy and Rhetoric, 9 (1976), 21-51. Thomas Farrell, "Knowledge, Consensus, and Rhetorical Theory," Quarterly Journal of Speech, 62 (1976), 1-14. Walter Carlton, "What is Rhetorical Knowledge? A Reply to Farrell - And More," Quarterly Journal of Speech, 64 (1978), 313-328. Thomas Farrell, "Social Knowledge II," Quarterly Journal of Speech, 64 (1978), 329-334. C. Jack Orr, "How Shall We Say: Reality is Socially Constructed Through Communication," Central States Speech Journal, 29 (1978), 263-274. "The Forum," Quarterly Journal of Speech, 66 (1980), 35-93, and 67 (1981), 93-101. Richard Gregg, "Rhetoric and Knowing: The Search For Perspective," Central States Speech Journal, 32 (1981), 133-144. Richard Cherwitz and James Hikins, "Toward a Rhetorical Epistemology," Southern Speech Communication Journal, 47 (1982), 135-162. Earl Croasmun and Richard Cherwitz, "Beyond Rhetorical Relativism," Quarterly Journal of Speech, 68 (1982), 1-16. Richard Crable, "Knowledge as Status: On Argument and Epistemology," Communication Monographs, 49 (1982), 249-262.

3. Crable, 250-251.

4. This is meant in the phenomenological sense. See Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Phenomenology and Perception, trans. Colin Smith, (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1962), pp. 110-125. Maurice Natanson, "Phenomenology, Role, and Reason (Springfield, Il: Charles Thomas, 1974), pp. 79-93.

5. Karl Popper, Conjectures and Refutations, (NY: Harper and Row, 1968), p. 127.

6. Gregory Bateson, Mind and Nature (NY: E. P. Dutton, 1979), pp. 31-32.

7. Michael Polanyi, Personal Knowledge (NY: Harper Torchbooks, 1964), p. 296. Similar hypothesis are upheld by Paul Feyerabend, Against Method (London: New Left Books, 1975); Norwood Hanson, Patterns of Discovery (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1958); and David Bohm, "Science as Perception-Communication," in The Structure of Scientific Theories, ed. Frederick Suppe (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1974), pp. 374-391.

8. Stephen Toulmin, The Philosophy of Science (NY: Harper and Row, 1953), pp. 30-42.

9. Bateson, p. 27.

10. Carlton, 318.

11. Cherwitz and Hikins, 142.

12. Croasmun and Cherwitz, 11.

13. "The meaning we attach to an object does not, in any sense, change the ontological character of that object." Croasmun and Cherwitz, 6. Later in the essay, the authors state that objectivity "does not imply particular ontological claims" (p. 10); nonetheless, there is the hidden claim that reality can be known.

14. Orr, 273.

15. Scott, "Ten Years Later," 262.

16. Brummett, 28.

17. See Cherwitz and Hikins, 142-145. Also, John R. Lyne, "Rhetoric and Everyday Knowledge," Central States Speech Journal, 32 (1981), 145-152.

18. Cherwitz and Hikins, 142.

19. Bateson, p. 30.

20. Paul Ricoeur, History and Truth, trans. Charles Kelly (Evanston: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1965), pp. 52-56.

21. Cherwitz and Hikins, 157-161.

22. Walter Fisher, "Toward a logic of Good Reasons," Quarterly Journal of Speech, 64 (1978), 376-384.

23. Gregg, 142-144.

24. Crable, 252.

25. Croasmun and Cherwitz, 5.

26. Croasmun and Cherwitz, 1.